Archives Advice No. 1

Practical Suggestions for Keeping Email

Considerations for Government Officials

Email messages are text documents which are created, stored, and delivered in an electronic format; email is the communication tool, equivalent to paper, microfilm, etc. in status; retention of email is decided by the CONTENT not format of the record. Georgia law defines a record as "all documents, papers, letters, maps, books (except books in formally organized libraries), microfilm, magnetic tape, or other material, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance or in performance of functions by any agency." (O.C.G.A. 50-18-91(5)).

Records can only be destroyed according to approved retention schedules. Georgia law also says that "the destruction of records shall occur only through the operation of an approved retention schedule." And, "the alienation, alteration, theft, or destruction of records by any person or persons in a manner not authorized by an applicable retention schedule is a misdemeanor." (O.C.G.A. 50-18-102 (b) and (c)).

Email messages sometimes document important government transactions and decisions. Like any other type of record, such messages are necessary to ensure government accountability.

Do I need to keep every email message?

No. Just as a large percentage of paper documents are created purely for administrative convenience, a large percentage of email messages may be transitory.

What should I keep?

Familiarize yourself with the General Retention Schedule for state agency records, available at http://www.sos.state.ga.us/archives/who_are_we/rims/.

Basically, email can be categorized into the following broad groups:

Policy and Program - These messages are especially important and often have a long-term retention. Their retention is long term (16 years to permanent) and need to be retained until their destruction is permitted by a state agency retention schedules. Archives staff should be contacted for assisting in identifying and transferring permanent historical email to the Archives.

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Messages in this category document the formulation and adoption of policies and procedures and the management of agency programs or functions. They may include:

- Correspondence with members of the public;
- Correspondence with outside agencies or bodies;
- Messages concerning contractual agreements;
- Case file management;
- Program reports;
- Budget documents;
- Personnel matters:
- Messages concerning decisions made by the agency.

Administrative Support – These messages are of a facilitative nature created or received in the course of administering a program or function. State agency retention schedules normally permit their destruction in one year to 15 years. Messages in this category may include:

- Telephone messages;
- Correspondence;
- Daily/weekly activity reports;
- Appointments.

Transitory - These messages have short term interest with no documentary or evidential value. These messages may be retained for their useful life (less than a month) and then destroyed. Examples include:

- Listserv messages;
- Meeting notices;
- General staff announcements
- Invitations to events, such as holiday parties;
- Thank you's.

How should I keep email?

There are two ways to manage email messages:

Print out and file – This is *not* the preferred method of maintaining email messages, but it may be your only choice.

File messages electronically – This method may be as complex as a large scale electronic document management system (if your office has one) or as simple as filing email messages in electronic file folders.

Is it enough to just keep the messages?

Whether you retain your email messages as paper or electronic files, you must ensure certain things about them:

You must capture proper contextual information. Contextual information may be harder to capture if you choose to print email messages out. Contextual information includes:

- the originator of the document
- the owner of the document
- the date the document was created or modified

The document must be readable for as long as you need to retain it. This is particularly important if you choose to retain documents electronically. If you save the document as a Microsoft Word file (for instance) and the record has retention of 50 years, how many versions will Word go through during the next 50 years? If the record needs to be read 49 years for now, will it be possible?

The document must be destroyed at the proper time. It is easy to save an electronic message and then forget it, but destruction of electronic records (at the proper time) is just as important as the destruction of paper records. See the *Files Management* tips, below, for assistance.

The document must remain confidential and secure, if necessary. Email messages, like paper records, must be secured from unauthorized access or alteration. Whatever system you use to file email messages, make sure it provides the appropriate level of security.

How can I manage all these messages?

Before messages arrive

1. *Select a storage medium.* Determine whether email messages will be printed out and filed as paper or stored electronically.

2. *Create a files management plan*.

a. Create a filing plan. Your filing plan should reflect how your office functions. For example, your folders (whether electronic or paper) might include:

Administrative Support messages

Administrative, 2004
Budget Request Records, 2004
Personnel Training Records, 2004
Travel, 2004
Etc.

Policy and Program messages

Program Area 1, 2004
Program Area 2, 2004
Program Area 3, 2004
Etc.

b. Set up folders outside the email system.

c. If possible, incorporate the retention period into the folder name. For example:

Administrative Support messages

Administrative, 2004 (Permanent)
Budget Request Records, 2004 (2011)
Personnel Training Records, 2004 (2010)
Travel, 2004 (2009)
Etc.

Policy and Program messages

Program Area 1, 2004 (2006)
Program Area 2, 2004 (2005)
Program Area 3, 2004 (2015)
Etc.

As messages arrive

3. *Identify non-record messages and delete at once*.

4. *Identify working documents*.
   a. Place these in a separate "Temporary" folder immediately.
   b. Delete each document when it is no longer needed.

5. *Identify corporate documents.*
   a. If necessary, print the message and all of its contextual data.
   b. File the message in its paper or electronic folder.

After messages are retained

6. *Create new folders each year.* This makes it easier to destroy records once a year as allowed by the retention schedules.

7. *Convert and migrate electronic files*
   a. Convert electronic files to a standard file format, such as PDF or XML, if possible.
   b. Migrate electronic files to new versions of software as necessary.

8. *Dispose of records when they reach the end of their retention period.* Once a year review email folders and delete messages that have reached the end of their retention period.

Further Information

The Georgia Archives is ready to provide assistance to state and local governments that have questions about records—paper, microfilm or electronic. Please call (678) 364-3790.

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